

SERVING THE LORD THROUGH SERVING YOUNG PEOPLE

Robert W. Vandermey

Do you ever look back at your life and ask yourself if the world is a better place because you are here? Will God say, "Well done, faithful servant of mine"?

Might not we ask the same question about a church? Has it had a lasting, positive effect on this world where God placed it? Certainly an important way to have a continuing effect is to reach children and young people for Christ. This must involve having an aggressive program that keeps reaching out to attract children and youth. It's easy to underestimate the value of our ministries to these youth if we lose our long-range perspective that in only a few years the young people we have now will be the adults in our churches.

Being pastor of our congregation over forty years has allowed me to see how the investments our people have made in children and youth outreach have paid great dividends. Many of the sixty-five people who have gone into short or long-term Christian services as pastors, missionaries, Christian school teachers, pastors' wives, etc. were influenced to do so through their church. It has been a joy to see former children emerge into adults who now take active part in their churches and often assume positions of leadership. How exciting to see homes established with Jesus Christ as the Head!

Recently I met a young mother who is a children's church leader. Her grandparents were saved here and brought their young children who in turn were saved and then participated in all the activities and opportunities provided by our church. Eventually one of their sons met a girl of our church and they married. Now their child is grown, married, serving the Lord, and training the fourth generation!

Recently, a young mother was singing a solo in our worship service and my mind flashed back to when she came as a little seven-year-old. After being invited to attend our two-week VBS our summer assistant (intern pastor) visited the home and asked the parents if they'd like their daughter to ride our bus to Sunday School. Soon the little girl accepted Christ and eventually all the family attended. Passing through all the ministries including Jr. Church, youth groups, VBS, summer camps, outreach service projects, etc., the girl went to a Christian college and after graduation married a fine Christian man. Now she is greatly involved in our church. In addition she is bringing her daughter to hopefully follow a similar process.

These accounts can be repeated over and over. Keeping long-range goals in perspective is so vital if we are to experience the value of ministries to youth.

Our church takes this responsibility and privilege very seriously. Much thought and prayer was made as to what direction we were going to go in future planning. There were many suggestions, but the emphasis on our agenda put youth as a high priority. This does not mean we ignore or consider the adults and elderly as any less important. Rather, we have found that adults

are energized through involvement and interest in the younger generation and the youth and children are enriched by their elders. Why? Because they sense early on that there is the love of Jesus Christ as the motivation! There's the formula for success! Because of our commitment to youth, we invested one and a half million dollars in a Family Life Center. It is a place for the whole family to use. (This includes adult Bible studies, walking club, etc.) At the same time we hired a seminary graduate with a burden for youth. His office is in the new facility where programs are being developed including Junior and Senior Youth nights involving active programs as well as discipleship classes for Senior youth. AWANA uses both the new center and the main church facilities each Wednesday for a large gathering of children and youth age three through grade eight, with high-schoolers working as trainees in the program. An energetic, motivated staff provides a most profitable program. We are equipped for basketball, volleyball and tennis as well as ping-pong, bumper pool, foosball, and other activities to attract youth.

Of course there are the Children's and Junior Church at both morning and evening services. Our presbytery winter and summer camps are effective as is our Vacation Bible School and Summer Bible Clubs. Emphasis is placed upon memorization and application of Scripture.

Some reading this may be saying that they could do more if they had this kind of facility. Early in my ministry my wife and I had a burden for children and early on the Lord blessed us with a sizable group to whom we devoted as much time as possible. Sometimes our home or the Christian youth center ten miles away were utilized. A basketball team was begun and this was very useful bringing in fellows and girls (even though we were the only team without uniforms!). Our team became the champions in the area and later a fine businessman provided the needed uniforms. Regular Bible studies helped ground them in the Word and we trained as many as possible to assume leadership in the children's ministries. A favorite event for many years was the semi-formal banquet and program held between Christmas and the new year. This helped to provide a special dress-up evening to offset the disappointment of not participating in questionable entertainment in the world.

Now my question is: Might this be a good time to reassess what we each are doing for the church of the future?